

Briefing

Poultry Standards of Identity

National Advisory Committee on Meat and Poultry Inspection November 5-6, 2003

Purpose

On September 29, 2003, the Agency published a proposed rule to amend the Federal poultry products inspection regulations to update the definitions and standards for U.S. classes of poultry. The intent of the proposal is to more accurately and clearly describe the characteristics of poultry in the market today. In accordance with section 8, paragraph (b), of the Poultry Products Inspection Act (PPIA - 21 U.S.C. 457), the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) must consult with the appropriate advisory committee prior to the issuance of food standards under the Act to avoid inconsistencies between Federal and State standards. Therefore, the Agency is providing this briefing paper to the National Advisory Committee on Meat and Poultry Inspection.

Talking Points

- The PPIA authorizes the Secretary of Agriculture to prescribe, among other things, definitions and standards of identity or composition for poultry products when it is determined that such action is necessary for protection of the public [21 United States Code 457(b)]. Poultry classes were established almost 30 years ago to assist in labeling five kinds of poultry: chickens, turkeys, ducks, geese, and guineas. The classes are defined primarily in terms of the age and sex of the bird, with Rock Cornish-type chickens also defined by breed.
- FSIS uses poultry class definitions and standards to ensure that poultry products are labeled in a truthful and non-misleading manner.
- FSIS is aware that genetic improvements and new poultry management techniques have reduced the grow-out period for some poultry classes, thereby producing birds that come to market sooner than previously possible, while extensive cross breeding has produced poultry with higher meat yields but blurred breed distinctions.
- Recently, FSIS reviewed the poultry class definitions with USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS), and both agencies discussed the issue with members of the poultry industry and poultry scientists. AMS relies on the standard poultry classes for their official "U.S. Classes, Standards, and Grades for Poultry."
- After examining current poultry production methods and the current poultry classes defined in 9 CFR 381.170, FSIS and AMS determined that a number of poultry class definitions did not reflect today's poultry characteristics or current industry practices. Advancements in breeding and husbandry have generally shortened the period of time required for birds to attain market-ready weights. For example, today, broilers can be produced in less than 10 weeks (frequently produced in 6 to 8 weeks). Thirty years ago, it took 12 to 13 weeks to produce birds with the physical characteristics of

broilers.

- Because present definitions fail to take into account current poultry characteristics and poultry production practices, the usual ages of the birds stated in the current class definitions are inaccurate and, as a result, may mislead consumers. Furthermore, without the proposed changes, FSIS' ability to enforce poultry class labeling claims is not as effective.
- FSIS is therefore proposing to lower the age definitions for six classes of poultry: Rock Cornish game hen from 5 to 6 weeks to less than 5 weeks; broiler or fryer from under 13 weeks to less than 10 weeks; roaster or roasting chicken from 3 to 5 months to less than 12 weeks; capon from under 8 months to less than 4 months; fryer-roaster turkey from under 16 weeks to less than 12 weeks; and young turkey from under 8 months to less than 6 months.
- The Agency is also considering revising the geese and guinea poultry class standards to include age designations; establishing ready-to-cook carcass weights for poultry classes, and proposing to define the Rock Cornish game hen or Cornish game hen class only in terms of age and weight (of either sex) that is marketed as an individual serving.
- Comments are requested on these issues as well as editorial changes to the poultry class standards that the Agency is proposing for clarity, consistency, and uniformity. Comments on the proposed rule must be received on or before November 28, 2003.

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